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# What to do with LaSalle Square

**Chester Smolski**

The recent proposals to the Providence Redevelopment Authority for the development of the one-acre parcel of land at LaSalle Square have raised some interesting questions about the use of this valuable piece of downtown property.

As one of the few pieces of available land left in the Weybosset Hill Urban Renewal Project, this property, currently in use as a parking lot, is located to the south of the Civic Center, and one of the proposals for the use of this land seeks to integrate that facility with a proposed convention hall for the site.

To this end, a feasibility study is currently underway, having been proposed by the Greater Providence Convention and Visitors Bureau for the PRA. Utilizing city personnel, the study is being done at no additional cost to the city and should be completed by early February.

The idea of a convention hall in this area is not a new one. A 1961 study done by the PRA entitled "Downtown Providence in 1970" proposed a sports, amusement and civic center for this general area, with part of the facilities projected to be a convention and exposition building complex. Interestingly, the one-acre plot of land in question was slated to have a building on it for the primary purpose of bowling alley use.

Fortunately, times and needs change. With the renewed interest in the downtown and in conjunction with the increased investment by the private sector and the city, the opportunities for development of the site take on new meanings.

Other proposals submitted to the PRA have included a 36-story hotel, housing for the elderly and a record store. Until the results of the convention hall study are in, the PRA should hold its decision for proposed use in abeyance so that all possibilities can be thoroughly researched.

Although some of the proposals raise serious questions as to use; for example, should even more housing for the elderly be built in the downtown and can a new hotel prove viable once the restored Biltmore Plaza reopens, there are two very important considerations that the PRA must deliberate on in the development of this site. Whatever its use, the property (1) must contain activities that serve as people attractors throughout the day and night and (2) should be an income producer for the city.

Although the Providence Civic Center has been able to show a profit in its operations while paying off the bond issue which paid for its construction, the Center, itself, is really a "hole" in the downtown. Other than the night-time and weekend activities which occupy the building for part of the year, what reason is there to go to the Civic Center? A small restaurant located in the Center draws only a few people. The result is valuable downtown space is not being used during the day and too many nights and weekends of the year.

The major advantage of the Civic Center in Hartford, Connecticut, also located in the Central Business District, is that there is a variety of activities within the Center itself, with shops, offices, restaurants and a hotel all serving as generators of people. Thus, the complex is utilized both day and night during the convention season (and

this activity is seasonal) and at other times of the year as well.

Should the LaSalle Square site prove feasible as a convention hall, it must be more than just a cavernous building seating 1500 people at one time on some few occasions and remaining a "hole" in the downtown the rest of the time. There should be a variety of facilities within the building which will draw not only the once-a-year conventioneer but also the daily shopper, office worker and diner. This is one of the keys to a successful downtown revitalization. The variety of

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opportunities, activities and, yes, even surprises is what makes a downtown viable, interesting and a people generator.

The second question of income producer is also a major consideration in the use of the site. If the city sells the land to a non-profit organization then this valuable site produces no taxes. With over 40 percent of development in the city already in this situation, i.e., schools, hospitals and state owned buildings occupying such land, it is necessary to raise the question of tax revenue for the city from this site, as one city councilman has already done.

A useful device that the city ought to study when putting this property into any use is ground rents, i.e., retaining the land and renting it to the developer of the site. Although not exactly the same, the agreement by the Rhode Island School of Design to pay the city \$2,000 a year for the services of the \$1.2 million Phillips Lead Building on South Main Street, essentially establishes this principle.

Why should the city sell off its valuable land, especially to non-profit uses which pay no taxes? Ground rents on city owned land could provide needed revenues for the city and the non-profits would make a nominal contribution for the cost of city services.

Ground rents are a common practice in Europe and in some communities of this country. As an example, Columbia University recently negotiated a new rental contract with the Rockefeller Center, and it now pays Columbia \$13 million a year as contrasted with the previous \$9 million annual charge, for the rental of the university-owned land under that impressive four block, midtown Manhattan development.

When a decision as to the use of the LaSalle Square site is made, the PRA must be vitally concerned that the new use provide an attraction for day and night time users of the facility. It should also insist that the city get some form of financial help, through taxes, rents or even a state subsidy, if the land remains city owned, because a convention hall would appreciably help the state tourist industry. To do less would abrogate their responsibilities to our capital city.

*Chester E. Smolski is Director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College.*